

Thailand: community exposes contradictions of green projects

Every year, grassroots activists, scholars, students and youth from different countries in Southeast Asian come together for an exchange forum during the Mekong ASEAN Environmental Week (MAEW). The seventh forum took place in September 2025, with the theme “The Fake Green: from Green Lies to Peoples’ Power”. (1) Representatives of the Kham Pa Lai community in Thailand were among those sharing experiences of what it means to be affected by ‘green lies’. They also shared experiences from their struggle against such green projects.

Over the past ten years, the residents of Kham Pa Lai organized themselves in the Nam Sap Kham Pa Lai Conservation Group. Through collective organization, they were able to stop the first of the ‘green lies’ that affected them: a government reforestation program that threatened their territorial rights. This community opposition to the reforestation programme built on their earlier resistance against a sandstone mine that resulted in the cancellation of the mine’s license in part of their community. More recently, Kham Pa Lai has been facing a new ‘green’ threat: the installation of a windmill park by Thailand’s state energy company (EGAT). The windmill park project risks destroying forest areas in part of their territory.

These threats have a clear timeline: they reached the Kham Pa Lai community after the military coup that took place in Thailand in 2014. The military regime came with a proposal to increase Thailand’s ‘green areas’ to 40 percent of the country. (2) So-called ‘renewable’ and ‘clean’ energies are promoted to allow extractive industries to continue expanding, claiming to be ‘carbon neutral’ or ‘climate-friendly’. (3) In reality, they produce harmful and wide-ranging impacts on communities.

As a spokesperson for the Nam Sap Kham Pa Lai Conservation Group said during the MAEW meeting: “We first struggled against the mining, then against the reforestation, and now against the windmill park - and we are starting to connect the dots. At the global level, they want to increase forest cover, they want to increase the carbon credits, so we are affected by this global policy of greenwashing as well. It is coming down to the country and then here to the community”.

The Kham Pa Lai community is located in Mukhordan province in Northeastern Thailand with the Mekong river flowing through this province on the border with Laos. The territory provides food, water, cultural and spiritual needs of the people of Kham Pa Lai, and whose families have lived on the territory for many generations. The community has been seeking legal recognition of their territorial rights over the land, a demand that state institutions have been ignoring, resulting in a state-led land-grabbing situation, like in many areas across Thailand.

“Our story is not simply one of resistance, but of endurance, adaptation, and the quiet determination to protect our way of life, which is deeply rooted in the forest”, explains the spokesperson.

In the conversation below, the Nam Sap Kham Pa Lai Conservation Group talk about their struggle.

Formation of the Conservation Group

The Nam Sap Kham Pa Lai Conservation Group was formally established in 2019, though our struggle began several years earlier.

We had already mobilized to oppose a proposed mining project, but without an official name or structure. We chose the name “Nam Sap” — meaning spring water — because the area under threat contained a natural spring that provided water year-round and is essential to the community’s survival.

When we first learned of the sandstone mining exploration in 2016, we began organizing local resistance in that same year. Initially a loose alliance of ordinary residents, the group grew to nearly 300 households at its peak.

Years of conflict created by the mining proposal and the extractivist projects that followed, gradually reduced that number to around 60 families — yet those of us who remained stood together, united by shared purpose.

For us, organizing as a group created strength and visibility. When traveling to district or provincial offices, we no longer felt small or invisible. Standing together gave us courage — and made officials more willing to listen.

The Sandstone Mine

In 2016, the Three Mothers Trading Company Limited applied for a concession to mine 34 hectares of our community forest land. The following year, the Kham Pa Lai Subdistrict Municipal Council approved the proposal after a local hearing and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

We opposed the decision and submitted petitions to multiple state agencies — even traveling to the capital, Bangkok, to demand accountability. After persistent campaigning, the municipal council revisited the issue in 2020 and reversed its decision, with 11 members voting against the mine and three abstaining.

The reversal was hard-won. We cited Section 7, Paragraph 4 of the 2017 Mineral Act, which prohibits mining in watershed or groundwater recharge areas. Our petitions forced the authorities to acknowledge that the mine site indeed violated this law — a small but significant victory for our community advocacy. (4)

Yet the threat remained. Supporters of the mine sought ways to re-activate the concession, while we began pushing for removal of the mineral zone from the national geological map. We feared that as long as the area was classified as a mineral reserve, new companies could apply for licenses in the future.

Our long-term vision was to turn the land into a collectively managed community forest— though we were wary that such status could later invite carbon credit schemes that again excluded local control.

For us, the forest must remain a place where people live with and care for the land, not one managed for profit.

The Reforestation Project

The next challenge came through the state’s Forest Reclamation Policy, under the military

government's Order 64/2014. Officials targeted parts of Kham Pa Lai land for 'reforestation', claiming the forest was degraded. In reality, it was a thriving forest — a seasonal pantry for our local communities.

From April to May, the first rains bring *krachiew* flowers and *hed phor* mushrooms. Between May and August come *hed rongok*, *hed din*, and *hed khai* mushrooms, bamboo shoots, beetles, and countless edible plants. It is a living food system, rich and self-renewing — what we call "the forest that feeds".

The upland forest (*pha khok*) covers about 16 hectares, divided between the spring area that supplies water year-round and mixed farmland at the forest edges. Our families gather firewood, graze cattle, and collect food daily; the forest sustains both livelihood and culture.

When the 'reforestation' campaign arrived, officials cleared villagers' fields, planted trees on the land the 'reforestation' campaign occupied without consultation with the community. They even filed criminal charges against villagers who have been using the land for agriculture, planting crops on areas now claimed by the government as "national forest" land. This is how the authorities are seeking to seize community land. For us, it felt like state-sanctioned theft: land seized under the false claim that it belonged to companies while we, the poor, were displaced. In total, roughly 480 hectares were designated for planting — including about 112 hectares of village farmland and 11.2 hectares that overlapped with the proposed sandstone mine.

By October 2016, legal actions against villagers who are accused of 'illegal' use of state land had begun; by 2018–2019, we were evicted and the land bulldozed for planting. Ironically, just a month after the first charges against community members, a mining application was submitted for the very same site — reinforcing our suspicion that the forest was reclaimed for mining.

The proposed area overlaps with forest land and watershed recharge zones that sustain residents in more than three villages and are used at the sub district level during periods of drought.

The "Dry Case"

Today, the charges against villagers remain classified as a 'dry case' (*kha-di haeng*) — a case with 'no offender found'. About 40 plots involving 45 people from our villages are still under dispute.

Because officials treated the land as uninhabited, they drew broad circles on maps, declaring as illegal the community use of whole areas. Some of our families lost entire plots; others lost half.

After years of petitions, a provincial inquiry found the operation unlawful. The Royal Forest Department later confirmed mistakes: most of the land had been cultivated long before 2014.

Eventually, we reclaimed our fields and resumed farming, though we lost nearly five years of income. Working with P-Move, a national land-rights network, we continue to push for case dismissal and fair compensation. The investigation has been suspended but not closed; the case now awaits Cabinet consideration.

Our families have lived here for many generations. We are not outsiders. Our parents lived and died on this land. We are not wrong — we are home.

The Wind Farm Project

In November 2022, as we planted cassava, red survey markers appeared across our fields. At first, we thought this signalled long-promised land titles that would recognize the community's right to use this land – something the community has been requesting for many years. Months later, we learned the markers were for a wind farm project.

When the company held a meeting in Village 5, all of us from Kham Pa Lai community — young and old — united to petition the municipality to reject the plan. Despite our protests, officials approved it, claiming the Royal Forest Department had already consented. We responded by blocking access roads and confronting company staff. Police were called.

Municipal officers defended the project, saying it would bring “tourism and development”, citing another wind farm site in Nikhom Bang Soi as an example. But some of us who visited that area saw noise, lightning strikes, and restricted access — not progress or ‘development’.

Encroaching Boundaries and Green Contradictions

Though the company sought permission only for Village 5, its actual operations spread into Villages 6 and 13.

The Royal Forest Department acknowledged that large numbers of trees would have to be removed, violating government regulations for siting of wind turbines in dense forests. An investigation found irregularities and possibly false reporting of forest conditions. The project has been temporarily suspended, but it has not yet been cancelled.

The company, named 555 Green Energy Co., Ltd., justified the project as part of Thailand's Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy Model, claiming it was 'clean' energy. To us, it was greenwashing — destroying 48 hectares of fertile forest to build 14 turbines and roads that would erase our foraging grounds.

The company was granted permission to use the land inside the national forest reserve from 2023 to 2053. The project overlaps with villagers' agricultural land and has caused conflicts in the community.

Wind energy is good, but not when it destroys communities. When a project labelled as 'green' ends up destroying a place that sustains community life, it turns into an injustice.

Image

Red markers in the community field for a wind farm project.

The Forest's Worth

We calculated what would be lost even just in money terms. Each mushroom season, about 300 people gather *hed phor* mushrooms — at least 3 tonnes a day, worth 500 baht (US 15 dollars) per kilogram. That's more than 1.5 million baht (US 46 thousand dollars) in natural value every day. It also provides *hed rongok* (US 12 dollar/kg), *hed din* (US 1.5 to 3 dollar/kg), edible roots, bamboo shoots, and small forest animals — the basis of local food sovereignty.

People come from Roi Et, Kalasin, and Sakon Nakhon Provinces to forage. The forest is our shared market.

The wind turbines would be less than a kilometer from homes, near the village temple and cemetery. Even monks have voiced opposition, fearing the constant noise would disturb the sanctity of the place.

Reflections and Strength

Through these overlapping struggles, we have become stronger. From people who once knew nothing of law or policy, we have built networks and alliances — with P-Move, EnLaw Foundation, and young environmentalists who now visit to learn from us.

We have discovered that unity is our greatest strength: sharing food, news, and encouragement keeps our spirit alive.

Women have become our leading voice — they speak in public meetings while men stay home to care for farms and families. Their calm but firm words often carry more power than anger. "We speak for our parents, our children, our community", they say. "Because if we don't, who will?".

Holding On to What Matters

Investors and supporters of the projects do not live here; they don't depend on this land. Their money divides the community — some take it, but most refuse. We do not want compensation, but the right to live with the forest as our ancestors did.

The natural spring — the heart of our livelihood — provides water all year for two villages and even for municipal use. If mining proceeds, that water, and the life it sustains, will be lost forever.

We have faced intimidation: officers visiting leaders, stolen protest signs, surveillance. But fear has not stopped us. We continue to resist — because, as we say: "This is our home".

A Message to those in the cities

You eat at restaurants and hotels, while we find our meals in the forest.
When the mushrooms bloom, we gather mushrooms.
When bamboo shoots sprout, we dig bamboo shoots.
Please think of us when you speak of green growth or clean energy.

The forest you call “unused land” is our kitchen, our water source, our school.
If you fence it off for mines, carbon credits, or wind farms, how will we live?
We ask the state to cancel these projects and drop all charges against villagers.
Investors already have thousands of hectares; we have only one or two.
Why must the small people always pay the price?
Elections promise that “the people come first”,
but after every election, it is always the investors who come first.

We know these projects are not truly green.
When turbines come, birds will vanish.
When mines come, dust will cover schools and homes.
When forests are seized in the name of reclamation, the poor lose everything.

Every government brings a new scheme —
a mine, a wind farm, now rare-earth extraction —
and we remain here, still fighting, still hoping,
because this land is our life,
and we will not give it up.

References:

- (1) MAEW 2025: [The Fake Green](#)
- (2) WRM, 2024. [Thailand's offset-based 'climate policy': more climate chaos and injustice.](#)
- (3) WRM, 2022. [15Years of REDD: A Mechanism Rotten at the Core.](#)
- (4) [The video reports that the Kham Pa Lai community submitted a petition about the mine to Mukdahan Province, and the governor's decision to investigate ultimately led to their victory.](#)